

GOAL 4: IMPROVING COMMUNICATION

Improving communication focuses on:

- Communicating effectively with the Executive and Legislative Branches of state government;
- Providing outreach to communities and the public served by the courts and probation; and
- Working within the Judicial Branch to foster co-operation and participation in the administration of justice.

Proposed Legislation/Budget Issues:

1. The Nebraska Supreme Court has a commitment to open government and civic engagement. This commitment is demonstrated by the recent addition of digital audio files of Supreme Court and Court of Appeals proceedings available to the public through the Judicial Branch Web site and the permanent placement of cameras in the appellate-level courtrooms. Court sessions are broadcast to the state's closed-circuit system and Web streamed through Nebraska Educational Television. **A budget issue includes a request for funding the maintenance of camera and audio equipment in the appellate courts.**

NEBRASKA SUPREME COURT

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NEBRASKA SUPREME COURT

Priorities of the Judicial Branch for the 101st Legislative Session 2009



GOAL 1:

PROVIDING ACCESS TO SWIFT, FAIR JUSTICE

Providing access to swift and fair justice focuses on the following areas:

- Providing adequate funding for the Judicial Branch in order to implement and maintain modern technology to support the work of the Judicial Branch;
- Addressing bias in the judicial system; providing meaningful assistance to self-represented litigants;
- Creating user-accessible courts and probation offices that effectively utilize technology and efficiently process and manage cases to resolve disputes in a fair and timely manner; and
- Examining processes and systems to find ways to improve how courts and probation offices conduct their business.

Proposed Legislation/Budget Issues:

1. A bill to increase the current court automation fee from six dollars to eight dollars which would be used to implement new technologies to address the public demand for ease of access of court information and transactions on a statewide basis. One example is the need to implement e-filing in all courts both urban and rural. This increase will also support the addition of Douglas County District Court to JUSTICE (the statewide court automation system).
2. A bill to add an "Access to Justice" fee of one dollar to all case filings. The Access to Justice Cash Fund would be used to improve statewide interpreter services in the courts and probation system and to implement programs to better serve indigent and pro se individuals.
3. The cost of interpreters in the judicial branch continues to increase. The budget includes a request to increase funding for interpreters and also to fund an *Interpreter Coordinator* to insure efficient use of interpreter services.

GOAL 2:

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Protecting children and families includes four major areas of focus:

- Abused and neglected children;
- Domestic relations;
- Juvenile justice; and
- Adoption

The needs of children continue to be a high priority for the Nebraska Judicial Branch. The Supreme Court Commission on Children in the Courts organized the first-ever Nebraska Children's Summit in 2006. As a result, the "Through the Eyes of the Child Initiative" has established 25 community-based court teams across the state. The goal of each team is to develop the best way to process abuse and neglect cases in local courts including cases involving the termination of parental rights. The Nebraska Legislature and courts took another step in addressing the needs of children and parents in domestic relations cases by revising the Parenting Act in 2007. New measures, including mandatory parent education, comprehensive parenting plans to address parenting functions and mandatory mediation in certain matters, are expected to decrease litigation over parental custody.

Proposed Legislation/Budget Issues:

1. The Parenting Act Fund was legislated in 2007 to subsidize the cost of mediation for indigent and low-income parents in Parenting Act cases through a filing fee in divorce and modification cases. The court currently does not have sufficient spending authority to allocate those funds. A budget issue includes a request for increased spending authority for this fund.
2. Two budget requests (in FY 2011) are funding for a *Juvenile Justice Systems Specialist* to create a coordinated response to juvenile services in courts statewide and funding for a *Domestic Violence/Sex Offender Program Specialist* to provide an integrated approach to managing the domestic violence and sex offenders on probation. These positions are currently grant funded.

GOAL 3:

ESTABLISHING ACCOUNTABILITY IN THE COURTS

The Judicial Branch, like the Executive and Legislative Branches of government, must be accountable to the public. Being accountable focuses on the following actions:

- Ensuring that staff at all levels are competent, professional and customer-service oriented;
- Establishing standards by which court and probation operations and performances can be measured; and
- Developing a clear strategic agenda that fosters public trust and confidence.

Proposed Legislation/Budget Issues:

1. The county courts and probation must attract and keep qualified staff. The job markets, particularly in the urban areas of the state, have made this more difficult. A budget increase is requested to reclassify some positions in probation and county courts to more accurately reflect the duties and compensate for on-call status duty. A bill to increase the Supreme Court Education Fund from one dollar to two dollars will be used to provide continuing education for court and probation staff.
2. Court and probation salaries fall behind comparable positions in surrounding states and the step salary schedule, unfunded since 2003, continues to create inequalities. The budget includes a 2.5% salary increase for all non-judicial employees of the court and probation system to help retain a qualified staff.
3. The probation system plans to institutionalize a system of quality assurance. Quality Assurance is a critical component of all parts of probation and the implementation of Evidence-Based Practices. This will help in determining if probation has met the goal of reducing recidivism. The budget includes a request to add a Quality Assurance position in probation.